

Press Statement on Women's Political Participation in the Run-up to the August 2023 Presidential Elections in Zimbabwe

Aug 01, 2023

The African Commission on Human and Peoples' Rights (the ACHPR), through its Country Rapporteur for the Republic of Zimbabwe, and Special Rapporteur on the Rights of Women in Africa, **Honourable Commissioner Janet Ramatoulie Sallah-Njie**, is monitoring human rights issues pertaining to the electoral process in the Republic of Zimbabwe, in accordance with its dual mandate of protecting and promoting human and peoples' rights.

The ACHPR commends the ongoing preparations aimed at ensuring that the national elections scheduled for 23rd August 2023 are conducted in a manner that is free, fair, and credible. Additionally, the ACHPR acknowledges the enthusiasm demonstrated by the electorate, especially women, in exercising their right to participate in the electoral process and thus contributing their voice in determining the future of their country and upholding a truly democratic society.

The ACHPR, however, expresses deep concern over reports of alleged escalating political tension and incidents that have resulted in offline and online attacks targeting voters and members of political parties, with a particular focus on women. The ACHPR notes that allegations of persistent online violence targeting women, often stems from the root causes of offline violence, and in many instances, escalates to physical harm. To safeguard the women who bravely express their political views despite facing continuous challenges both online and offline, the Government of Zimbabwe should endeavour to strengthen its efforts in combatting hate speech and harmful content, that fuel animosity and incite violence against women in politics. The ACHPR emphasizes the importance of safeguarding the online space to ensure women's active participation in the political sphere without facing attacks. By doing so, we encourage women to continue being an integral part of the digital world.

The ACHPR also received reports about women allegedly experiencing gender-based violence and discrimination due to their own affiliation or that of their relatives with opposition political parties. This distressing situation not only jeopardizes the lives and well-being of these women, but also poses a significant threat to the credibility of the election and the democratic values within the country.

We emphasize that such recent events and the growing concerns regarding women's treatment during the ongoing election process may undermine our unwavering commitment to promoting gender equality and safeguarding women's rights in the political sphere.

The ACHPR recognizes that the alleged acts committed against members of political parties, especially women, represent a significant violation of the rights and freedoms protected by various regional human rights instruments adopted under the auspices of the African Union (AU). In this regard, **Article 13** of the African Charter on Human and Peoples' Rights (the African Charter) guarantees the right of every citizen to participate freely in the government of his country, either directly or through freely chosen representatives in accordance with provisions of the law. Moreover, the Protocol to the African Charter on Human and Peoples' Rights on the Rights of Women in Africa (the Maputo Protocol) in **Article 19** obliges States Parties to "take specific positive action to promote participative governance and the equal participation of women in the political life of their countries through affirmative action, enabling national

legislation and other measures to ensure the equal participation and representation of women in electoral process.”

In addition, the African Charter on Democracy, Elections and Governance in **Article 4** obliges State Parties to “commit themselves to promote democracy, the principle of the rule of law and human rights and recognize popular participation through universal suffrage as the inalienable right of the people” and most importantly **Article 17** requires State Parties to “re-affirm their commitment to regularly holding transparent, free and fair elections in accordance with the Union’s Declaration on the Principles Governing Democratic Elections in Africa.” In order to ensure this obligation, the Charter requires States to establish and strengthen independent and impartial national electoral bodies responsible for the management of elections; establish and strengthen national mechanisms that redress election related disputes in a timely manner; Ensure fair and equitable access by contesting parties and candidates to State controlled media during elections and ensure that there is a binding code of conduct governing legally recognized political stakeholders, government and other political actors prior, during and after elections.

It is essential to recognize that violating citizens' rights to political participation, as acknowledged in the mentioned instruments, through various methods of suppression, results in the infringement of a wide range of human rights, including the rights to dignity, personal security, liberty, and the right to be free from discrimination, among others.

The ACHPR seizes this opportunity to remind the Government of Zimbabwe to uphold its obligations under the aforementioned instruments, recognizing and guaranteeing the rights of all citizens to freely participate in the political sphere of the country. Of particular significance is enabling the full and fearless participation of women in the electoral process by ensuring a safe online and offline environment, fostering a truly inclusive and democratic society.

The ACHPR urges the Government of Zimbabwe and Opposition political parties to use all available measures to discourage any form of verbal and physical violence that suppress the free participation of individuals in general and women in particular, in the ongoing electoral process. The ACHPR also appeals to the supporters of political parties, urging them to abstain from using or spreading inciteful expressions that could lead to attacks or discrimination against individuals or groups, based solely on their affiliation with a particular political party, thus creating a respectful and tolerant political climate.

The ACHPR emphasizes once again that responsible national institutions entrusted with overseeing and monitoring the electoral process should ensure strict compliance with the laws and standards governing the free political participation of citizens, in order to ensure free, fair and democratic electoral environment.

Finally, the ACHPR strongly urges the Government of Zimbabwe to take decisive legal measures and collaborate with relevant stakeholders to address the long-standing historical discrimination that has hindered women's political participation and create a safe and supportive electoral environment where women can actively engage without fear of digital or physical attacks in the lead-up to the 2023 election. By doing so, the Republic of Zimbabwe will foster a more inclusive and representative democracy that empowers women and ensures their voices are heard and valued in the political process.

31 July 2023

Banjul, the Republic of The Gambia